

COME HOME, GOD IS CALLING



By Max Lucado

Introduction

NOT A pretty sight, the pigpen of sin. Filth. Smelly. Rottenness that sticks to your skin, mats your hair, and fills your soul. It's hard, oh so hard, to get clean.

You can't even track your path to this pit of slime.

It wasn't always like this!

One minute, life was a party. Then, in a blink, this...

Or maybe you traveled a slow, downward spiral. Small steps taken.

Wrong turns. But each decision moving you miles away from the Father who would do anything to bring you home.

I want to come home!

There's only one clear view from the pigpen. Look up! Look up to the One who can rescue you. And listen. God is calling!

Chapter One

SUDDEN SIN

IT HAPPENS in an instant. One minute you are walking and whistling, the next you are wide-eyed and falling. Satan yanks back the manhole cover and an innocent afternoon stroll becomes a horror story. Helplessly you tumble, aware of the fall but unable to gain control. You crash at the bottom and stare blankly into the darkness. You inhale the evil stench and sit in Satan's sewage until he spits you out and you land, dumbfounded and shell-shocked, on the sidewalk.

Such is the pattern of sudden sin. Can you relate to it? Very few sins are premeditated and planned. Very few of us would qualify for Satan's strategy team. We spend our time avoiding sin, not planning it. But don't think for one minute that just because you don't want to fall that you won't. Satan has a special trick for you, and he only pulls it out when you aren't looking.

This yellow-bellied father of lies doesn't dare meet you face-to-face. No sir. Don't expect this demon of demons to challenge you to a duel. Not this snake. He hasn't the integrity to tell you to turn around and put up your dukes. He fights dirty.

He is the master of the trapdoor and the author of weak moments. He waits until your back is turned. He waits until your defense is down. He waits until the bell has rung and you are walking back to your corner. Then he aims his dart at your weakest point and...

Bull's eye! You lose your temper. You lust. You fall. You take a drag. You buy a drink. You kiss the woman. You follow the crowd. You rationalize. You say yes. You sign your name. You forget who you are. You break your promise. You buy the magazine. You lie. You covet. You stomp your feet and demand your way.

You deny your Master.

It's David disrobing Bathsheba. It's Adam accepting the fruit from Eve. It's Abraham lying about Sarah. It's Peter denying that he ever knew Jesus. It's Noah, drunk and naked in his tent. It's Lot, in bed with his own daughter. It's your worst nightmare. It's sudden. It's sin.

Satan numbs our awareness and short-circuits our self-control. We know what we are doing and yet can't believe that we are doing it. In the fog of weakness, we want to stop but haven't the will to do so. We want to turn around, but our feet won't move. We want to run and, pitifully, we want to stay.

It's the teenager in the backseat. It's the alcoholic buying "just one". It's the boss touching his secretary's hand. The husband walking into the porn shop. The mother losing her temper. The father beating his child. The gambler losing his money. The Christian losing control. And it's Satan gaining a foothold.

Confusion. Guilt. Rationalization. Despair. It all hits. It hits hard. We numbly pick ourselves up and stagger back into our world. "Oh God, what have I done?" "Should I tell someone?" "I'll never do it again." "My God, can you forgive me?"

No one who is reading these words is free from the treachery of sudden sin. No one is immune to this trick of perdition. This demon of hell can scale the highest monastery wall, penetrate the deepest faith, and desecrate the purest home.

Some of you know exactly what I mean. You could write these words better than I, couldn't you? Some of you, like me, have tumbled so often that the stench of Satan's breath is far from a novelty. You've asked for God's forgiveness so often that you worry that the well of mercy might run dry.

Want to sharpen your defenses a bit? Do you need help in reinforcing your weaponry? Have you tumbled down the manhole once too many times? Then consider the ideas below:

First, *recognize Satan*. Our war is not with the flesh and blood but with Satan himself. Do like Jesus did when Satan met him in the wilderness. Call him by name. Rip off his mask. Denounce his disguise. He appears in the most innocent of clothing: a night out with the boys, a good book, a popular movie, a pretty neighbor. But don't let him fool you! When the urge to sin rears its ugly head, look him squarely in the eye and call his bluff. "Get behind me, Satan!" Not this time, you dog of hell! I've walked your stinking corridors before. Go back to the pit where you belong!" Whatever you do, don't flirt with this fallen angel. He'll thrash you like wheat.

Second, *accept God's forgiveness*. Romans, chapter 7 is the Emancipation Proclamation for those of us who have a tendency to tumble. Look at verse 15: "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do."

Sound familiar? Read on. Verses 18, 19: "For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing."

Man, that fellow has been reading my diary!

"What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (v.24).

Please, Paul, don't stop there! Is there no oasis in this barrenness of guilt? There is. Thank God and drink deeply as you read verse 25 and verse 1 of chapter 8: "Thanks be to God--through Jesus Christ our Lord!... Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

Amen. There it is. You read it right. Underline it if you wish. For those *in* Christ there is *no* condemnation. Absolutely none. Claim the promise. Memorize the words. Accept the cleansing. Throw out the guilt. Praise the Lord. And...watch out for open manholes.

Chapter Two

THE PRODIGAL

*While the son was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt
sorry for his son.*

So the father ran to him and hugged him and kissed him.

- Luke 15:20

WHY were they always at each other's throats? Bill felt as if he hardly knew his son any longer. Josh was demanding the money his mother had left him when she died. That money was for college expenses, and Josh could only have it after he turned eighteen. Now he was eighteen, and he wanted it, but not for college.

"It's mine, isn't it?" he had shouted.

"Of course, it's yours," his father had replied. "But it's college money, not play money."

"I'm not going to play, Dad. I'm just going away."

"Where? For what?"

"I don't know, I just want to get out."

And so the arguments had gone on for weeks. It was only this morning that Bill had made his decision. Long before the sun came up, he went into Josh's room and sat beside the bed. He didn't know what time Josh had come in the night before, but the smell of beer suggested it hadn't been early. Josh hadn't even undressed. He was sleeping in his jeans.

The father stared at this son's face for a long time. Years ago when he would come in from business trips, he would pull a chair up beside the bed of his sleeping boy. He'd push back the mop of hair from Josh's forehead and touch the soft cheeks. Everything seemed so simple then. The biggest challenge was airing up a bicycle tire or catching a fly ball. Now the boy's earring, the weird haircut. The tattoo . . . it was as if his son lived in a different world, a world the father could not understand—but feared.

"We lost something, Josh," he said to his sleeping son. "Maybe we never had it. Maybe we buried it with your mom." Bill's hand was again on the forehead of his son.

By the time Josh awoke, Bill knew what he had to do.

"I'll give you the money," he had told Josh at breakfast. "Get your things. I'll take you to the airport."

Now as they waited for the plane, Josh interrupted his thoughts.

“Dad, they’re boarding.”

The two walked toward the gate and stopped.

“I guess I’ve got everything,” Josh said quietly as he turned to his father.

What Josh saw next he’d never seen before—and never expected. Tears. Though the father blinked and turned away as if to look out the window, Josh saw them.

Josh plopped on the floor beside the bucket. He looked at the clock on the wall. Three A.M. He was so tired. He’d cleaned the kitchen, washed the bathrooms, done several loads of laundry, and now he was mopping the bunkrooms.

He reached to take a cigarette out of his shirt pocket only to find the pocket empty. When you don’t have money, you don’t have cigarettes.

With his back against the wall and his arms resting on his knees, he looked into the semi-darkness of the bunkroom. Though he couldn’t see their faces, he could hear their snoring—a room full of drifters and drunks. Some were running away. Some were coming back. But all were dreaming of a better place. All were longing for home.

Of all the places Josh thought he would end up living, a Salvation Army bunkhouse wasn’t one of them. When he had arrived in the city three months ago, he was cocky and rich. The only thing he flashed more than his money was his grin. He bought a car. He rented an apartment. Got new clothes. He had more friends than he could count.

Then came the call from the bank. He was out of money. That night a restaurant refused his credit card. He couldn’t make the payments on the car. The dealer took it back. He sold his stereo. He pawned his jewelry. Someone stole his backpack and his wallet. Every day the circle of friends got smaller. Finally he couldn’t pay the rent. They kicked him out.

Josh spent the next week on the streets—the same streets where he had turned heads with his style. He now turned heads because of his stink. That’s when he heard about this shelter where you could sleep in exchange for ten hours of work.

“Hard to believe I’ve been in this place for a month,” Josh said to himself as he sat on the floor. “A month of dishes and trash cans and cleaning up the vomit of people too drunk to make it to the bathroom.”

For just a moment he allowed his thoughts to drift homeward. Memories of a warm bed. Good meals. Conversations on the porch. He thought of the farm. He thought of his father’s workmen coming in at the end of the week to collect their pay.

“Those guys have it better than I do,” he sighed. “Even the guy who cut Dad’s grass has good meal and a home.”

Funny. Just a few months ago home was a prison with too many rules—a cage holding a bird who wanted to be free. But now Josh was longing for home.

He stood and took a few steps into the bunkroom he was about to clean. Suddenly he saw his face in the mirror. It looked different. He pushed back his hair and stared at the reflection. He saw something he’d never seen before. He saw his dad. He’d been told he looked like his father—but he couldn’t see it. Tonight he did. Same chin. Same nose.

“Dad.” In his mind he saw his father again. In the airport his father’s words hadn’t come, but his tears had. And the tears had said more than any words ever could have.

Josh stood straight up and spoke aloud—so loud that the guy in the nearest bunk rolled over. Josh didn’t care.

“I’m going home.”

He put down the mop and bucket and walked out into the night.

Hank sips the coffee in the styrofoam cup and sets it back on the dash. This is his favorite time of the day--early morning just as the gray sky gives way to gold. Like most truck drivers, he drives at night. But, unlike other drivers, Hank likes to stay on the road a few hours into the morning.

“Every sunrise is a miracle,” he’d tell them as he would leave the truck stop. “Who wants to miss a miracle?”

In his thirty years on the road Hank had seen many sunrises, most of them alone. This morning, however, he is about to have company. As he turns his truck onto the highway, he sees a hitchhiker—a young man in jeans and a tattered shirt.

Hank doesn’t often pick up riders. But something about the boy catches his eye. He pulls his rig over to the side of the road. In his side mirror he can see the boy running toward him. Hank leans over and opens the passenger door.

“Thanks for stopping.” The hitchhiker is nearly out of breath. “Going far?”

“At least another two hours south.”

“That’s all I need.” The young man climbs into the truck.

“Where you headed?” Hank inquires.

“Home.”

“Been gone long?”

When the boy turns to answer, Hank hears sorrow in his voice. “Too long, sir. Too long.”

“My name’s Hank.”

“Josh is mine,” responds the boy.

Hank looks at Josh’s dirty clothes and weary eyes. “Looks like you could use a good night’s rest and a meal.”

“Yeah. I’ve kind of hit hard times.” Before he knows it, Josh finds himself telling his story.

When he finishes, he looks up into Hank’s eyes, which are warm with compassion.

“So you finally got so hungry you decided to go home?”

Josh pauses a moment before he answers. “No, it wasn’t that. I mean, I could have handled the job. I might have even gotten on my feet.”

“Then what made you decide to go home, Josh?”

“The thought of what I did to my dad. I broke his heart. I need to tell him I’m sorry.”

“Are you going to stay home?”

“I don’t know, Hank. I’m going to see if I might get work nearby. But I don’t think Dad will want me under the same roof...Whoa,” he says suddenly, “this is where I get off.”

Hank doesn’t slow down. “No need, son. I’ll take you right to your door.” Hank guides the semi down the exit and onto the small road. Following Josh’s instructions, he weaves in and out of the farms and flatlands.

Hank notices that Josh isn’t saying much. The boy is staring at the floor of the truck. His hands are clenched between his knees. The seasoned driver places his hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Josh, its going to be...”

“What if he doesn’t even let me in the gate?” Josh interrupts. “What if he doesn’t let me tell what happened?”

“Josh, I’m a dad. I know how dads feel. You’ve got to tell your father the truth. Give him a chance to forgive you.”

Josh looks over at the driver and then watches his father's fields come into view. "We're almost there."

When they reach the house, Hank pulls the rig over to the side of the narrow road and stops.

"I'll wait here." He smiles. "Just tell him the truth, Josh."

Josh nods, takes a breath, and opens the door. "Thanks for the ride and thanks for the advice."

Hank watches as the tall boy walks slowly down the path toward the house. Hank can tell that Josh is talking as he walks. He is rehearsing what he is going to say.

He is only halfway to the house when at the top of the trail a figure appears. Though Hank has never seen him, he knows, in an instant, it is Josh's father. Only a dad would do what this man is doing. Running. Running fast. Arms spread wide and a smile no one can miss. For a few moments Hank doesn't speak. He just memorizes the scene of the morning sun rising behind the dejected boy and the running father.

Finally Hank can stand it no longer. "Josh," he yells, "look!"

When Josh sees his father only feet away and getting closer, he falls to his knees. He tries to speak, but once again the words won't come. His well-rehearsed speech is forgotten as he throws his arms around his father's waist.

Hank wipes away tears of his own as he starts his truck. He has seen what he came to see. He has seen the miracle of the morning.

Chapter Three

PROMISES FOR PRODIGALS

*When Jesus said, "I am he,"
they moved back and fell to the ground.
- John 18:6*

MY FATHER taught me the lesson early: Don't create havoc in the garden. You can play ball in the yard. You can have races in the alley. You can build a fort in the tree. But the garden? Leave it alone.

It was a small garden, about the size of a walk-in closet. We grew nothing exotic, except for some mint. We'd soak the leaves in our summer tea. Though the vegetables were tasty, we didn't need to grow them. We could have bought them at the market. So why did Dad insist on having a garden?

He loved to see life. And a garden is a place of life, a place where buds explode and plants push back the soil. A place of turnips and tulips and tomato plants. A place worthy of love and protection. Flowers are fragile. Plants are precious. So yank the weeds and scatter the varmints. Put up a fence. Grow a hedge. Make a scarecrow.

"Son, whatever you do, don't go trampling around in the garden."

I hate to think I have anything in common with the devil, but I guess I do. Satan learned the same lesson: Don't mess around with a garden—especially a garden that belongs to the Father.

The Bible is the story of two gardens. Eden and Gethsemane. In the first, Adam took a fall. In the second, Jesus took a stand. In the first, God sought Adam. In the second, Jesus sought God. In Eden, Adam hid from God. In Gethsemane, Jesus emerged from the tomb. In Eden, Satan led Adam to a tree that led to his death. From Gethsemane, Jesus went to a tree that led to our life.

Satan was never invited to the Garden of Eden. He did not belong there. He was not wanted there. He slithered as a snake into God's garden and infected God's children.

That's all he's done since. Hasn't he entered a few of your holy gardens?

We even call it "holy matrimony." The word altar implies the presence of God. Marriage was God's idea. The first wedding occurred in the first garden. But that doesn't make any difference to the devil. He snakes his way into every home with one desire—to destroy.

Sexual intimacy is God's gift. Virginity is a rose plucked from the garden, given by God and intended to be shared with your forever partner. Satan mocks such loyalty. He is the father of incest and abuse. He is the author of immorality. He is the pimp of the garden.

We give sacred oaths and make solemn promises. We vow to be a good parent, a true companion, and a loyal friend. But Satan's head turns when he hears a pledge. "We'll see about that," the father of lies smirks.

In God's eyes, a child is holy. The innocence of youth, the freshness of childhood, the joy of an infant. There was never a moment when Jesus turned away a child. But there has never been a child Satan didn't despise. He was killing babies to kill Moses. He was destroying infants to destroy the Christ. His tactics haven't changed. Millions of babies are still aborted; thousands of children are abused. Jesus said of Satan, "He was a murderer from the beginning" (John 8:44).

Is there a realm untouched by Satan? Is there a place unscarred by his sword? The church? The government? Children? Purity? Promises?

And you! And me! We are called to be holy. We were made to be holy. Set apart for his good work. We are the prized flowers of the garden. But is there one person who has not felt the foot of the intruder?

What Satan did in Eden, he does today. For that reason we need to know that what Jesus did in Gethsemane, he does today. He reclaims the holy. He will not long sit silent while Satan strip-mines the sacred. At the right moment Jesus stands and speaks. And when he stands and speaks, Satan stumbles and is silent.

Exactly what happened in Gethsemane.

John tells us that "Judas came there with a group of soldiers and some guards from the leading priests and Pharisees" (John 18:3). A bit of study reveals that Satan has masterminded a mighty coup. He has enlisted the muscle of each significant force of the drama—the Romans, the Jews, and the apostles.¹

First he has a "group of soldiers." The Greek word is *speira*. It has three possible meanings. It can signify a Roman cohort of three hundred men. It can refer to a cavalry and infantry totaling nineteen hundred soldiers. Or it can describe a detachment known as a *maniple*, which contained two hundred men.¹

Amazing. I always had the impression that a handful of soldiers arrested Jesus. I was wrong. At minimum two hundred soldiers were dispatched to deal with a single carpenter and his eleven friends!

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 2, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 222.

Also present were “some guards.” This was the temple police. They were assigned to guard the holiest place during the busiest time of the year. They must have been among Israel’s finest.

And then there was Judas. One of the inner circle. Not only had Satan recruited the Romans and the Jews, he had infiltrated the cabinet. Hell must have been rejoicing. There was no way Jesus could escape. Satan sealed every exit. His lieutenants anticipated every move, except one.

Jesus had no desire to run. He had no intent of escape. He hadn’t come to the garden to retreat. What they found among the trees was no coward; what they found was a conqueror.

Note the dialogue that ensued:

Knowing everything that would happen to him, Jesus went out and asked, “Who is it you are looking for?”

They answered, “Jesus from Nazareth.”

“I am he,” Jesus said. (Judas, the one who turned against Jesus, was standing there with them.) When Jesus said, “I am he,” they moved back and fell to the ground.

Jesus asked them again, “Who is it you are looking for?”

They said, “Jesus of Nazareth.”

“I told you that I am he,” Jesus said. “So if you are looking for me, let the others go” (John 18:4-8).

Remarkable. They stand only a few feet from his face and don’t recognize him. Not even Judas realizes who stands before them. What a truth. Seeing Jesus is more than a matter of the eyes; it is a matter of the heart. The enemy is next to Jesus and doesn’t realize it.

He reveals himself. “I am he.” His voice flicks the first domino, and down they tumble. Were the moment not so solemn it would be comic. These are the best soldiers with Satan’s finest plan; yet one word from Jesus, and they fall down! The Roman guard becomes the Keystone Cops. Two hundred fighting men collapse into a noisy pile of shields, swords, and lamps. Don’t miss the symbolism here: When Jesus speaks, Satan falls.

Doesn’t matter who the evil one has recruited. Doesn’t matter if he has infiltrated the government. Doesn’t matter if he has seduced the temple. Doesn’t matter if he has enlisted one of the original, handpicked apostles. The best of Satan melts as wax before the presence of Christ.

Jesus has to ask them again whom they seek. “Who are you after?”

When they answer that they are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, he instructs them, “So if you are looking for me, let the others go.”

What is this? Jesus commanding them! A Jew instructing a Roman? A renegade directing the temple guard? We turn to the commander, expecting a reply. We look at Judas, awaiting his retort. We listen, expecting someone to announce, “You’re not the one in charge here, Nazarene! We’ll take whoever we want.” But not only are they silent, they are obedient. The apostles are set free.

Many players appear on the stage of Gethsemane. Judas and his betrayal. Peter and his sword. The disciples and their fears. The soldiers and their weapons. And though these are crucial, they aren’t instrumental. The encounter is not between Jesus and the soldiers; it is between God and Satan. Satan dares to enter yet another garden but God stands and Satan hasn’t a prayer.

Don’t miss the message:

Our fight is not against people on earth but against the rulers and authorities and the powers of this world’s darkness, against the spiritual powers of evil in the heavenly world (Eph. 6:12).

The Son of God came for this purpose: to destroy the devil’s work (1 John 3:8).

Don’t miss the promises:

Satan falls in the presence of Christ. One word from his lips, and the finest army in the world collapsed.

Satan is silent in the proclamation of Christ. Not once did the enemy speak without Jesus’ invitation. Before Christ, Satan has nothing to say.

Satan is powerless against the protection of Christ. “I have not lost any of the ones you gave me” (John 18:9).

When Jesus says he will keep you safe, he means it. Hell will have to get through him to get to you. Jesus is able to protect you. When he says he will get you home, he will get you home.

Let me conclude this chapter with an important question. Has Satan invaded a garden of your life? Has he profaned a holy part of your world? Your marriage? Your purity? Your honesty? Has he taken away from you a rose God gave? If so, let Jesus claim it back. Today. Now. Before you turn the page.

Forgive me for sounding urgent, but I am. Satan has no authority over you. If he has invaded a garden of your life, then invite Jesus to reclaim it. Open the gate to God. He will enter and do what he did at Gethsemane. He will pray, and he will protect.

Why don't you do that?

Don't know how? It's easy. I'll help you. Let's pray. You and me. I'll show you the way; you fill in the blanks.

Precious Father, I praise your name. You have reclaimed so much in my life. I was lost, and you found me. I was confused, and you guided me. I had nothing to offer, but still you loved me.

I confess that I still need help. I have a part of my life that needs your touch. Satan is battling for a garden in my heart. Don't let him win. Drive him out. He is a liar and has been since the beginning. Please defeat him. I'll give you the glory.

Father, here is the area where I need your strength _____.

(AND HERE IS THE PLACE
WHERE I STEP OUT. I'LL LEAVE
YOU AND GOD TO TALK OVER
THE DETAILS.)

STUDY GUIDE

CHAPTER THREE

PROMISES FOR PRODIGALS

Echoes of Thunder

1. “Were the moment not so solemn it would be comic. These are the best soldiers with Satan’s finest plan, yet one word from Jesus and they fall down!”
 - A. In what way is this moment solemn? In what way might it be comic?
 - B. What do you think might have been running through Satan’s mind at this time? What might Judas have been thinking?
2. “Don’t miss the symbolism here: When Jesus speaks, Satan falls.”
 - A. In what way is this statement a spiritual principle?
 - B. Have you ever seen this principle at work in the life of your family or church? If so, explain.
3. “When Jesus says he will keep you safe, he means it. Hell will have to get through him to get you.”
 - A. How does this statement make you feel? Why?
 - B. In what ways has Jesus kept you safe thus far?
4. “I’ll show you the way; you fill in the blanks:

“Precious Father, I praise your name. You have reclaimed so much in my life. I was lost, and you found me. I was confused, and you guided me. I had nothing to offer but still you loved me.

“I confess that I still need help. I have a part of my life that needs your touch. Satan is battling for a garden in my heart. Don’t let him win. Drive him out. He is a liar and has been since the beginning. Please defeat him. I’ll give you the glory.

“Here is the area where I need your strength _____.”

Flashes of Lightning

1. Read John 18:1-9.
 - A. Who appears to be in charge of this event? Why do you say this?
 - B. In what way were the events of the garden a fulfillment of prophecy (see especially verse 9)?
2. Read Ephesians 6:10-13.
 - A. What are we instructed to do in verses 10 and 11? What is the reason for this command?
 - B. What kind of struggle are we involved in (verse 12)? How should this change our strategies?
3. Read 2 Timothy 4:16-18.
 - A. What had happened to Paul?
 - B. Who alone stood with Paul? Why did he stand with him?
 - C. What promise is made in verse 18?

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